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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses summer seminars on teaching writing that members of the Applied Writing Program at Ithaca College offered to their colleagues in other disciplines. These seminars grew out of the conviction that every teacher who assigns papers is, to some degree, teaching writing, and many of those teachers, unsure of the limits of their responsibility, encounter difficulties in evaluating student writing. The syllabus for each seminar included these major headings: an introductory unit, an unstructured discussion of student papers (submitted earlier by faculty participants), a getting-the-student-started unit, a unit on organizing papers, a unit on the source paper (one that uses library research), a marking and commenting unit, a round-up session, and a discussion evaluating the seminar. Some individual comments from seminar participants are included. (Author/RL)

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We Must All Teach Writing

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For the past two summers members of the Applied Writing Program at Ithaca College in upstate New York have offered to their colleagues in other disciplines a seminar on teaching writing. These seminars grew out of the conviction that every teacher who assigns papers is, to some degree, teaching writing, and that many of our colleagues are troubled in this role. They are unsure of the limits of their responsibility and of the best means for helping students learn to write well.

In our conversations with our colleagues we had heard them despair over the quality of their students' writing, and we had seen them look to us for a solution to these problems. In turn, we writing teachers had realized how much we needed our colleagues in other disciplines to reinforce what we taught. We needed them to demand of the students the quality of writing we demanded, and not to let shoddy work pass for want of the time or the experience to remedy it. We felt that a consensus among all of us who deal with student writing as to the standards and qualities desired, together with a common language to discuss writing and some common teaching methods, would greatly further the cause of good student writing. In other words, we needed to sit down and talk formally with our colleagues in other disciplines.

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Just as we were coming to these conclusions, Ithaca College formed, in 1975, an Employee Development Fund dedicated to encouraging among its staff and faculty new administrative and teaching methods. From this fund three members of the Applied Writing Program (AWP) were granted money to run a summer seminar each of two successive summers for eight faculty members. They came from a wide range of disciplines: history, sociology, physical education, chemistry, mathematics, philosophy, anthropology, psychology, speech/drama, physics, and foreign languages. For three weeks each summer, these seminars, chaired by faculty of the AWP, considered a variety of student writing problems and a variety of possible solutions. Out of these seminars emerged an agreement among participants, and (with their help) among many of their colleagues, that writing is important and that resources from all departments must be devoted to improving student writing. Participants finished the seminar with new paper assignments, a new vocabulary for criticizing papers, and a renewed determination to use the writing program and its writing lab as continuing sources of aid. Finally, there emerged from these two seminars faculty members who had a new confidence in their own abilities to deal with some writing problems within the very real time limitations they faced.

The Writing Program in its Setting

Ithaca College is a private institution of 4,300 undergraduates, half in liberal arts and the other half in a variety of professional schools -- Health Services Administration; Health, Physical Education and Recreation; Business Administration; Communications; Music. At Ithaca we have witnessed the same decline in the writing skills of incoming freshmen that colleges everywhere have experienced. In 1973, Ithaca College separated its writing teachers from the

English Department and launched the Applied Writing Program. Over the last four years the twelve faculty members of this program have developed more than eighteen different courses and a number of non-traditional methods for teaching writing. Courses range from remedial to advanced composition, from personal essay to technical writing, from the argumentative essay to poetry and short story. Non-traditional methods include self-paced, one-credit-hour packets (called "Invisible Comp") dealing with small parts of the large writing process; a writing laboratory serving the entire campus with both referral and drop-in services; affiliated courses (in which we teach one-, two-, or three-credit-hour courses side-by-side with other courses such as cultural anthropology, developmental psychology, introduction to sociology, film aesthetics, literature, American history, linguistics, and science and society); and now the summer seminars for our fellow faculty members.

As this curricular development proceeded, we faculty of the AWP met together often and shared not only our ideas for developing and perfecting our various courses and modes of instruction but also a number of particular experiences. One that alternately amused and dismayed us was seeing papers written by our past students and submitted to faculty in other disciplines that these students would not have dared submit to us -- papers ill-organized, ungrammatical, just plain sloppy. Another saddening experience most of us shared was hearing a faculty member from another discipline announce that he graded only for the content of a student's paper, not for its style or presentation. Yet another shared experience was seeing a paper with an inflated grade -- a paper, to our minds, that was simply illiterate. Was this acceptable as college-level work?

At last we conceived the summer faculty seminar to answer this question and others corollary to it.

The Seminar

Once funds were granted us, our next task was to find faculty from other disciplines who saw some of the same problems and wished to look for solutions. We announced to the faculty of the School of Humanities and Sciences (and, the second summer, to the faculty of the entire college) that the seminar would be held and that a stipend of $300 would accompany participation. Those who applied were asked to tell us the number of papers they assigned each year and their brief assessment of the problems they faced with student writing. From the applicants, on the basis of interest, number of papers assigned, and variety of disciplines to be represented, we chose eight. We met two hours each morning, four days a week, for three weeks the first summer, four the second.

With three members of the AWP as seminar leaders, the seminar was structured according to a syllabus that allowed a great deal of flexibility and room for inserting entire new topics. The major headings of the syllabus included an introductory unit; an unstructured discussion of student papers (which faculty participants had earlier submitted and which we reproduced in advance of the seminar); a getting-the-student-started unit; a unit on organizing papers; a unit on the source paper (one that uses library research); a marking and commenting unit; a round-up session; and a discussion evaluating the seminar.

The seminar began with a discussion of goals desired by the participants, and both times we found a surprising variety. Some faculty wished to learn how to comment better on student writing. Others wanted quick ways to get improvement on the papers they assigned. Still others wanted to brush up on their own writing skills and on the vocabulary with which to discuss writing. Some faculty wanted sets of exercises to give their students. All wanted a consensus on what

constituted good writing among their students and on standards by which such writing might be judged. And each member wanted help solving one or two particular problems related to his/her own assignments.

Not every goal could be met equally, and by the end of the seminar there remained disagreement over one or two. For example, participants could agree that all faculty needed to hold the line on acceptable standards for student writing; yet due to the nature of particular disciplines and particular assignments, participants were forced to conclude that each faculty member must draw his own line, set his own standards. Seminar participants seemed pleased to share this concern for standards with their colleagues and willing to set their own standards for written work and distribute them to their own students.

Following the setting of seminar goals, we began an unstructured discussion of representative student papers, varying from excellent to abysmal. We purposely let discussion range widely, even chaotically, because all faculty needed to test their perceptions of quality and relative importance of certain writing problems against those of their colleagues. For example, these questions were asked: What is the proper relation of teacher to student in terms of a paper? Can a paper be graded for content alone? What is the connection between the assignment and the resulting paper? Is a personal essay acceptable as academic work? What is the relative importance of grammatical and mechanical correctness to the quality of the paper? Out of this discussion a frame of reference was gradually established, allowing us to reach consensus often. In both seminars, faculty engaged in these early discussions enthusiastically, intensely, and freely.

Surprisingly enough, even when faculty disagreed about the weight given certain

stylistic qualities in these student papers, they agreed when they described what is meant by a C paper, a B paper, an A paper, or a failing paper. In discussing individual student essays, writing teacher and non-writing teacher alike assigned grades within an acceptable range of each other.

With this encouragement -- that stylistic qualities for grading student papers could be defined and agreed upon -- we turned our attention to improving student writing. Here we were faced with another major problem encountered by our colleagues in other disciplines: the limits to their time. How could they find time among their disciplinary duties -- teaching, research, and departmental administration -- to be writing teachers, too? How could they lead the student through the process of writing a paper, beginning to end? Recognizing this time problem, seminar participants began to share time-saving, quality-improving strategies.

For example, we first examined our assignments -- how they are given, what they ask, and what assumptions underlie them. The writing teachers felt that their colleagues often communicated to their students too little of what was expected on each assignment; many assignments were not detailed enough to guide the student to a fruitful subject of a suitable size and complexity. The necessary connection between the way an assignment is given and the quality of the writing in response was more obvious to writing teachers because of the greater quantity of writing they receive and because of their constant focus in writing courses on style and what affects style. In examining examples of faculty assignments and essay exams, matched with written student responses, the entire seminar could soon agree on the extreme importance of clear, well-structured, and detailed assignments (preferably given as a typed handout rather than orally). Improving

assignments became an agreed way to improve student writing quickly.

Continuing in this area of getting the student started, faculty from all disciplines began to share successful preparatory devices: exercises in finding a thesis, pre-paper conferences, outlining, pre-writing, providing sample student papers, and even reviewing an early draft. The writing faculty offered, and many colleagues accepted, the idea of a series of shorter, more focused written assignments in lieu of (or leading up to) the long, term-end assignments. Each preparatory device was considered with an eye toward both improving quality and saving time.

Another appealing time-saver was collecting from each student one sentence that states the thesis of his/her paper and from that sentence quickly diagnosing whether the paper will satisfy the assignment and will be of the proper size, or will present major problems of organization and unfocused thought.

Still another time-saving suggestion was quick organizing in the form of "blackboard" outlines -- tree diagrams, flow charts, and key-word outlines. These techniques have in common the use of lines, arrows, geometric shapes, and numbers in rapid visual presentation of logical connections; because they are blackboard techniques, they invite constant quick revision (by erasure) until all the ideas to go into a paper are carefully and logically organized.

Faculty who had begun the seminar in dismay at their students' prose began to feel somewhat more encouraged when they discovered that a small investment of their time at the early stages of student writing might yield great return at term-paper time.

Having begun the process of helping students write better papers, we turned

our attention to the practices and theories of commenting on papers. Seminar participants asked, Is what I write on my students' papers helping those students? Are my own pet peeves getting in the way of improving my students' next papers? Should I be commenting on content, mechanics, grammar, organization, logic, or some combination of these qualities at once?

We began by listing individually both our pet peeves ("a lot" as one word, "it's" in place of "its," or "-wise" added to the end of a word, Madison Avenue-wise) and useful symbols for common grammatical/mechanical errors (our own or chosen from a list of correction symbols in a handbook issued at the beginning of the seminar). Comparing lists of peeves gave us perspectives on writing problems; integrating the lists of symbols gave us a way to deal with smaller errors in student compositions.

Next we reproduced student papers already marked and commented upon, and we "graded the graders." We noted in the papers a spectrum of commentary, from the paper so cluttered with comments as to be confusing, to the paper with so few comments the student might have no inkling how to improve his writing on the next paper. Leaving room for individuality toward the middle of this spectrum, seminar participants agreed on some commenting strategies as important, even vital. Among these were that both the best and the worst passages be commented upon; that <u>both</u> content and style should receive comment; that organization and logic should be criticized; that clarity of expression and unity of thought must be bedrock matters of style; and that where extensive written comments would result and therefore consume great amounts of time, the individual conference might replace these written comments. We in the AWP were pleased to see our colleagues willing to make "the writing commitment."

Special Presentations

Because part of the seminar's purpose was to introduce to our colleagues in other disciplines our writing program and its various strategies toward solving the "writing problem," we organized several special presentations.

To one seminar meeting we invited the two members of the AWP in charge of our writing laboratory to lecture on the lab's present functioning and on its possible future uses. Since the lab sees mostly referrals from other faculty members, the presentation reemphasized the lab's strength and versatility in helping them and their students.

Another presentation was by an AWP member discussing the library resource paper that is so often assigned by our colleagues. This discussion made the distinction between the survey paper, where the student merely reviews a topic using whatever library resources are available to him, and the research paper, where the student develops a thesis and synthesizes what he finds in the library.

In the discussion following this presentation, many participants realized that they didn't make this distinction clear yet were annoyed when they asked for a research paper, a true inquiry, and received a simple survey, or vice-versa. Also, participants were reminded how little many undergraduates know of the content of the discipline or the uses of the library or of the ways to organize and integrate source material. And several participants remarked that they had been assigning term-end research papers without careful integration into their course and without fully realizing that the lengthy research paper is often more appropriate to graduate study than to undergraduate.

Finally, we invited several students to present to the seminar their

experiences in learning to write. Of the three on the panel, one reported that she had first learned to write -- especially to organize -- when she was required to summarize (in outline form) certain philosophical articles in a philosophy course. The second student stated that he had learned to write in writing courses taken over a period of several semesters, especially because his major professors consistently required good writing of him. The third student was unhappy that her sincere desire to learn to write had been frustrated in spite of her own efforts, partly because of her acknowledged problems with expression and partly because she could not receive sufficient help even when she sought out individual instructors. All three students mentioned bad experiences with instructors who were either unavailable for conference, uninterested in writing problems, or unwilling to write helpful comments on their papers.

A different form of special presentation was what we call "gadflies": small, thought-provoking presentations by members of the seminar. These often took an unpopular or unorthodox position. Is the essay exam an appropriate measure of a student's work? Can't a student discover what he has to say by simply sitting down and writing (the classical idea of "inventio")? Why assign an end-of-term paper, especially when a student cannot profit by the comments made upon it? Are my assumptions about students accurate (is the student I face anything like the student I was?)? Can a conference take the place of written comments on a short paper? These gadflies often stung us into open debate on some of the hallowed assumptions of teaching.

Common Misconceptions

During the discussion in each seminar, certain misconceptions about writing

and the teaching of writing kept cropping up. From the point of view of the writing teachers, one of the great strengths of the seminars was the forum it provided us to undo these misconceptions.

One set of misconceptions concerned the teaching of writing. Some participants wanted to separate style from content. Most admitted to making that distinction purely out of desperation, faced as they were with semi-literate papers. Here the corresponding misconception was that writing teachers did not comment on, nor grade according to, content. Our colleagues in other disciplines were often surprised to find that we would fail a paper because its content was not correct, or grade a paper down because of logical errors in the presentation of its content. The second misconception in this group was that teaching writing was mechanical, that, like typing and keypunching, writing could be reduced to a series of technical actions culminating in an academic paper. Here the corollary was that there was a unified teaching method, an agreed-upon approach to teaching writing. It took some convincing for our colleagues to see the merits in different approaches and to admit that our different individual backgrounds as writers necessarily (and rightly) meant varying approaches to teaching others to write.

Another group of misconceptions related to students. The first in this group was that the "writing problem" was new, unexpected, and relatively unexplainable. That changes in demography (a greater percentage of high school students was going on to college) and in reading habits (the passive act of watching TV had replaced the active act of reading) had been going on for some time, and that composition teachers had raised the cry long ago -- these explanations and others convinced our colleagues that their students' writing problems could be rationally explained, but that turning these trends around was no simple matter. These same explanations,

we hoped, convinced our colleagues not to give up on the effort once the energy for "vogue" solutions wore off.

Another misconception of this second type was that students who had passed a writing course would automatically transfer the skills they had learned to other courses. We writing teachers recounted, each of us, the tale of a colleague in another discipline waving an ex-student's paper in our face and crying, "He says he took a writing course from you!" We have looked, and there, sure enough, was the name of a student who wrote excellent papers for us but who had apparently given our colleague quite a different quality of paper. Why? Perhaps, we speculated, the history paper assignment looked like an entirely different thing from the paper for the writing course; or because the student thought that style was important only to writing teachers.

At times we writing teachers found we were mistaken about what other teachers wanted of their students' writing, and so we often built our assignments around phantom needs students would find in other courses. For example, among the modes of exposition we often emphasized definition, only to find our colleagues in other disciplines generally uninterested in extended-definition assignments. We writing teachers had avoided discussing techniques for writing book critiques, only to find our colleagues in other disciplines often assigning book critiques. After the seminars we in the AWP could better gear our introductory courses to prepare students to meet our colleagues' requirements.

From discussions of these misconceptions on both sides, we writing teachers were pleased to find a new respect among our colleagues for the difficulties presented us as writing teachers; and we were better able to understand the difficulties

faced by other teacners integrating written work into their course content.

Seminar Evaluation

The last seminar meeting each summer was set aside for discussion and evaluation of the seminar. In an informal meeting room participants praised and criticized for two enthusiastic hours. All agreed to write formal evaluations in the weeks following the seminar. These evaluations contained comments in three categories: strengths of the seminar, changes to be made for the next summer, and personal revisions colleagues would make in their own teaching vis-a-vis student writing.

One comment universally voiced at the seminar's end meeting was that the opportunity to discuss teaching as each one of us confronts it is rare among college professors, but valuable. As we emerged from the isolation of our classrooms to the community of the seminar we discovered how much our experience of teaching is alike, how often an exchange of strategies of teaching or of creative assignments was useful across disciplines, and how invigorating such sharing was.

But perhaps now is the time to let our colleagues from across the college tell about the seminar themselves; it is their perceptions, after all, that will prove the merits of the faculty seminar on student writing.

> I continually was finding that I had been assigning work for which I had no coherent rationale. The class caused me to try to articulate the reasons why I give particular assignments and think about the appropriateness of the assignment for what I think my students should be able to do.
>
> Paul Westbrook, Drama-Speech

> I am now concerned with the problem of the nature of my written assignments and the kinds of information that I desire from students . . . I have been suitably convinced that assignments

must be used more as pedagogical tools; they must provide a problem-solving component and not just a test for specific knowledge.

Julian Euell, Sociology

[The seminar] convinced me of the need for reinforcement in writing, i.e., it does no good to expose students to a good course in writing if the written work of the students in other courses is not stringently evaluated.

Murray Steinberg, Physics

The demonstrations of techniques for teaching students, for example, the value of detailed outlines and "pre-writing" before beginning a writing assignment, was immensely beneficial. In fact, I recently used these methods with some success to assist a student to reduce her confusion about writing a large research paper.

David Luciano, Psychology

My classroom creativity zoomed -- I started having new ideas about how to do things in class. This occurred largely from the seminar interactions -- other people had good ideas about teaching. They had developed good ways of getting around problems we all face . . . I feel renewed energy for teaching as a result of the seminar; not much that happens outside my department speaks so directly to my needs.

Lynn Aikin, Psychology

A much more congenial group would be hard to find. There was an intellectual honesty present that is too rare; and had the seminar continued for several more weeks, that honesty about who we are, who we serve, why we fail or succeed might have deepened even more.

Stanley Barondes, Education

Having individual staff members guide the exposition and discussion on various days gave a freshness of point of view and was not destructive of overall unity. Participants got to see how some rather important differences of theory and practice among Program members were no barrier to working effectively with the problems of student writers. This was a great corrective for any participant who might have hoped for a formula approach to improving student writing. In this area of the behavior of the staff, I was confirmed in respect for the Program and in great hope for its good effect on the academic life of Ithaca College.

Kevin Schmelter, Foreign Languages

The source paper: This topic was unexpected and caused me to think about matters I have never given much thought to. It made me aware that I can be of more help to my students in using the library and its resources. Having the presentation by the writing laboratory people was an excellent idea. Barbara Adams and Miriam Kramnick did a masterful job in helping us to understand the role, the problems, and the needs of the writing center. To me it came as little less than a revelation.

Benjamin Richards, Philosophy

The seminar stressed the feelings of inadequacy and panic students have when they have to write term papers and offered specific advice to help overcome such negative feelings. It led me to reconsider what I do in my courses and to modify some aspects of my teaching. For example, I will institute some (modest) writing requirements in my oral practice course, using some very specific suggestions made in the seminar.

Francoise Gebhart, Foreign Languages

The writing seminar was informative, enjoyable, and highly constructive. I hope it will be continued and that the College will promote the art and science of language in both written and spoken forms.

Lou J. Hughes, Chemistry